Peirce's Semiotics and the Russian Formalism: Points of Convergence

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Abstract

It is a prevailing opinion nowadays that Saussurean semiology and Peircean theory of signs are two major semiotic schools which, although they have certain theoretical and historical background in common, are utterly incommensurable. However, it appears that the opposing extremes of Saussure's semiology and Peirce's semiotics seem to be reconcilable in the light of the Russian formalism— essentially a Saussurean-type semiotic school, which gained wide acclaim in the mid-20th century Europe, alongside the French structuralism. In his late paper «Oedipus in the light of folklore» Vladimir Propp, one of the formalists, explores the problem of narrative continuity in different folklore traditions. Taking the story of Oedipus Rex as an example, he describes a set of «motives» shaping the story as specific iconic units of discourse by means of which certain forms of narrative are transmitted from one historical period to another. His analysis reveals some striking similarities with Peirce's early ideas on the nature of signs and representation, and in particular those Peirce puts forward in his «On a New List of Categories». This paper undertakes to reinterpret some of the late formalist ideas on continuity in terms of Peirce's semiotics. The brief account it presents has a double aim: (1) to show the possibility of building a case where Peirce's basic semiotic ideas might actually be applied as efficient tools in analysis of different traditional discourses, and (2) to enable us to put some basic formalist analytical categories in the wider context of Peirce's semiotics, making purely structural aspect of meaning a particular case of Peirce's theory of signs.

Among the numerous perspectives on the semiotic studies, the two major traditions, stemming respectively from Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Peirce, are generally believed not merely to disagree in some important respects, but to be utterly incommensurable. And of course there are many contrasting features to support this view. For example, while Saussure made most of his basic assumptions against the background of rationalism, Peirce's pragmatism and semiotics emphatically deny such a background; while continental semiology is largely preoccupied with describing natural language as a self-contained system of differences between linguistic signs, Peirce's semiotics makes much wider ontological claim; while in Saussure's Course the constitutive law of meaning has no importance for the «practical Self», Peirce puts decisive emphasis on conceivable practical results, etc., etc. The list of these contradistinctions may be significantly extended.

However, the opposing extremes of Saussure's semiology and Peirce's semiotics are made to seem more reconcilable in the light of intellectual heritage of the Russian formalism — essentially a Saussurean-type semiotic school, which gained wide acclaim in the mid-20th century Europe, alongside the French structuralism. Quite unexpectedly, late formalist analysis reveals some striking similarities with Peirce's early ideas on the nature of signs and representation, and in particular those Peirce puts forward in his «On a New List of Categories».

Broadly speaking, a considerable number of late formalist works (and most strikingly those of Vladimir Propp, a Russian philologist, the author of the world famous monograph *Morphology of the Folk Tale*) clearly suggest that formalists at certain point began to realize the importance of understanding how pure structures of meaning change in the course of history, and became interested in semantic mechanisms furnishing correspondence between discourse and historical realia. For instance, Propp, in his late works, just like Peirce, stressed the strong analogy his approach had with the evolutionary interpreted natural classification (Propp 1984: 16-38, 100-115; Edmunds 1983: 76-121). This same idea serves as a refrain which repeats itself throughout Peirce's writings.

According to late Peirce, the idea of natural classification is just one of many examples which represent continuity as *relational generality*.[1] A still earlier germ of this same synechistic concept was presented by Peirce in his «On a New List of Categories» in 1867. It is in this paper that Peirce introduced the term «interpretant» which was to play in his own list the role which the notion «I think» played in Kantian deduction of the pure concepts of the understanding.[2] And it is in this paper that Peirce offered alternative, non-Hegelian interpretation of Kantian synthesis of the manifold of intuition in representing the synthesis not as a pure self-positing but as an act of continuous development addressed to possible future.

Again, some of Vladimir Propp's late papers reveal striking similarities with the early semiotic ideas presented in Peirce's «New List». To illustrate the case, it is necessary to refer in some detail to one of Propp's works, where he explores the relationship between folklore

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[1] CP 6.190.

[2] Especially cf. Kant I. Critique of Pure Reason,. trans. Norman Kemp Smith, London: Macmillian Press:, 1933, B 133, and «On a New List of Categories», Writings of Charles S. Peirce. A Chronological Edition (ed. by the Peirce Edition Project), 1982-, vol. 2, Bloomington, p. 54.

discourses and historical reality by appealing to the problem of narrative continuity in different folklore traditions.

Like the majority of other Saussure-inspired analysts, Propp applies, as an analytical tool, the notion of archetypal structures (motives, or narrative functions), which serve as a basic grammar used by any folklore tradition in creating narratives. These functions are decontextualized universals which enter any folklore discourse as the principal building blocks of a discursive structure of any myth or fairy tale. Simply put, these are units which actually put a story together.

Taking the story of Oedipus Rex by Sophocles as an example in his paper called «Oedipus in the light of folklore», Propp names several narrative functions, such as «prophesy», «parental marriage», «escape», «nurturing», «patricide», «sphinx», etc., each one being subject to a similar analysis. But, unlike other formalists, instead of simply presenting these narrative functions as structural components shaping the plot, in the course of his analysis Propp explicates them step by step as specific iconic units of discourse by means of which certain larger forms of narrative are transmitted from one historical period to another. In other words, instead of routinely describing the way mutual arrangement of distinct discursive elements endows the story with meaning, that is, instead of describing pure a-historic narrative structure, he uses the Oedipus example to show how folklore discourse *exists in time*.

To illustrate the way Propp's analysis may be reinterpreted in Peirce's terms, we will take as an example the most spectacular motive from the Oedipus story, which Propp signifies as «a prophesy».

As far as the prophecy motif is concerned in the story of Oedipus Rex, Propp is making two very important points. First, the content of the prophecy within the plot is clearly divided into two parts, which are, on the *one* hand, the forthcoming Oedipus's murder of Laius, his father, and, on the *other* hand, his marriage to Jocasta. Peculiar as it is, the *first* part of the prophecy becomes known to Laius as rendered by Jocasta *long before* the *second* part is revealed to him. Second important point is that the prophecy is placed at the *beginning* of the narrative, although it obviously is not the starting point of the story (starting point in terms of Aristotle's «Poetics»). It is rather a derivative of its *ending*.

So, at first sight, the prophesy motive appears to play no constitutive part in the story. Nevertheless, it turns out that if the prophecy of precisely *this* kind should be *excluded* from the story, the plot would literally fall apart, since nearly all the meaningful events would become incomprehensible, and the behavior of characters would seem totally unmotivated. If we exclude what an oracle said to Laius, we would simply not be able to understand *why* this or that character does what he or she does. For a formalist, to solve this problem is to tell *why* this motivational structure occupies exactly *that* position in the plot which it actually occupies.

Propp suggests that the source of the motif in question might be the collision between two major symbolic systems, namely the two basic historical modes of inheritance of power, which he roughly calls «the pre-patriarchal» and «the patriarchal» ones. In accordance with the former system, the throne was to be passed to the man of *other* kin through his marriage to the king's daughter (for this and what follows see the diagram below).

As it usually happens in almost every European fairy tale reflecting this mode, a hero leaves home, and it is the *king's daughter* who is the key figure in the succession mechanism.

This mechanism, therefore, results in a relationship of apparently conflicting, or *indexical* nature between the bride's father and his stranger son-in-law who takes power through the marriage. (Of course, it is a simplified scheme and in some other myths we have more complex symbolism — like, for example, in the first chapters of «Exodus»: the Pharaoh orders his people to throw all newborn Hebrew boys into the Nile. A Levite woman saves her baby by setting him adrift on the river in an ark, and then the Pharaoh's *daughter* finds the child, names him Moses and brings him up as her own. But the narrative structure is the same: the hero has to leave home.)

As history goes on, the conflict-provoking (pre-patriarchal, or matrilocal) mode of succession to the throne from father-in-law to son-in-law is replaced by the conflict-free (patriarchal) succession from father to son.

With the pre-patriarchal mode, there is an apparent conflict between the men, whereas the patriarchal mode does not force the hero to leave home; on the contrary, the bride shall come to his own father's house instead. At the same time, her arrival brings about a relationship of apparently conflicting, or *indexical* nature between herself and her mother-in-law, which is a mirror reflection of the indexical father-in-law/ son-in-law relationship.

So far we've had two distinct systems of indexical relations — which I would like to call «*a relate*» and «*a correlate*». The question is how do we pass from one to another? In other words, how does the tradition convey its meanings in the course of history; or, in still other words, what is the mediation structure which makes the flow of historic experience continuous?

It is worth mentioning that the mode of inheritance under which the throne is passed from father-in-law to son-in-law, and the very moment of handing in power to the successor, obviously conflict-provoking in this case, corresponds to the mythic plots which contain neither an oracle, nor the prophecy motif as such. The motif in question first appears only in the patriarchal age, when the father's fear of the son becomes incomprehensible. (Of course, in this era, assassination of the king by his successor can be easily interpreted as something quite natural, too; but in this case the actor inevitably acquires a different function, turning into *villain* instead of *hero*.) It is due to this new principle of power inheritance that the prophecy in the story of Oedipus does not mention succession to the throne, only the *murder of the father*. It is so since the throne is passed on from father to son in accordance with the natural way of things, and only the fact of *murder* needs to be justified.

Thus in Sophocles, Oedipus as a hero of the patriarchal era acts absolutely *unnaturally* when killing his father. And so do other characters. For instance, in his attempts to prevent what has been prophesied by the oracle, Laius seeks to get rid of Oedipus. However, he does not kill him, but, having his calf muscles pierced, he gives orders to a slave to carry the boy to the desert, thereby condemning Oedipus to death and *simultaneously* saving his life. The pierced calves and other markings on Oedipus's body are the «indices of death», but at the same time they are the indices that are later actually to help his mother recognize him. Therefore, the hero is not as much sent to death as he is brought on to the road.

Being a patriarchal hero, though, Oedipus does not have to go looking for a bride elsewhere. For this reason, having left once, he has to get back home anyway — and this is exactly how the story by Sophocles goes.

At that point, Oedipus behaves in an odd way. Every time he begins acting like a character of one historical age, he ends up entering the other in the course of one and the same story. All actions he performs have the form of a loop: first he leaves home, and then he returns; he is a hero in answering the sphinx's questions, and he is a villain in murdering his own father, etc. Like most of the other characters in this plot, he simultaneously belongs to the two discursive indexical systems (*bilaterally symmetric to one another, as the diagram shows*). And for this reason, his deeds cannot be adequately interpreted just in *either* of them.

And still, it is the prophecy motif that actually, in Peirce's terms, provides a *ground* for understanding Oedipus's behavior. It actually gives reasons which justify his deeds. The prophecy itself, or an iconic sign connecting two systems of indexical relationships, is there to bridge the fundamental motivational gaps brought about by the transition from the pre-patriarchal plot to the patriarchal one.

While building up artificial motivations upon the ruins of the natural ones, this motif establishes a new symbolic system, which embraces the two systems described above and is *different* from both of them in that it actually *does not have any historical referent*. It describes neither pre-patriarchal, nor patriarchal world. At the same time, the new symbolic system constructed in this way provides for the reciprocal interpretation of the other two, each of which actually *does* refer to a particular historical period. The plot arising within the new system repudiates the historical truth, and yet it allows us to grasp the meaning of certain historical changes.

As it is placed at *the beginning* but speaks about *the end*, the prophecy — iconic sign — thereby reshapes the previous plot dramatically, bringing *no* significant changes to the basic structure of plot components in the earlier design. The prophecy *restores* the links between old motifs rather than creating new ones. It reconstructs the motivations of the characters, reassembles the plot using its old foundation and the new details prompted by the course of history.

In short, a traditional discourse tends to preserve its identity throughout time — it doesn't want to change. But it creates an additional set of intermediate semiotic structures which have a twofold nature. Namely, although it is a virtual *connection* between the events, the prophecy remains a material part of the plot. Linking the events, it can no longer be the ideal means to compensate for the lack, nor can it be *time itself*, a purely implicit, non-material connection, for although it *is* a connection, it is also an *event*, a fact explicitly presented in the story. Sharing the nature of both an object and a relation, it represents a crack of history, — like there is no way to have a broken jug glued up without a joint. The prophecy cannot be the *change itself*, but it really is a *sign* of that change. By pulling together the historical «before» and the historical «after», it creates a peculiar symbolic system which turns history into a loop, thus making clear the significance of a historical change, and consequently, revealing the meaning of the true historic events.

From this point of view, Propp, in using purely formalist tools, faces the problem similar to that which Peirce seeks to analyze in his «On a New List of Categories»: the problem of continuity. Peirce in his Kant-driven formal analysis, as we know, needs to find a general term which, in bringing a multitude of experience to unity, doesn't add any other concept to it, and, at the same time, makes the flow of experience continuous. He calls this general term «an interpretant».

In like manner, Propp needs to find a unit of discourse which, in bringing two sets of historical facts together, doesn't create any other *historically significant description*, and, at the same time, provides a smooth transition from one historical narrative to another. Just as Peirce's interpretant is both a significant outcome of a sign *and* a mediating representation addressing itself to a future interpretation, the story of Oedipus Rex is a transitional system of relations which mediates between two distinct historical discourses and, *in doing so*, confers meaning to each one of them *relative* to another. In Peirce's terms, being a *relational* unity, it creates a *generality* of historical understanding.

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